

Epistemology in Practice: Skepticism, Fake News, and the Ethics of Belief

Laura Frances Callahan
laurafrancescallahan.com

WHAT IS THIS?

This is a proposal for a **practically-oriented epistemology course**, in which students are asked to reflect deeply and critically on the ways in which they are committed to forming and revising opinions, as well as participating more generally in the flow of ideas as informants and bystanders.

By the end of the course, students will be expected to write an **epistemic manifesto**, outlining the kind of epistemic agent they want to be.

The course will involve both traditional reading assignments as well as **“immersive” assignments**. These are assignments that will ask students to do something – engage in a certain conversation, reflect in a certain way, pay attention to something in a new space – and then also write about it.

WHAT QUESTIONS WILL BE ADDRESSED?

The class will be concerned with five main questions, which will structure the class in five units.

- How **skeptical** should I be, and what kinds of things might I hope to know?
- How, if at all, should **disagreement** matter in my forming/revising opinions?
- How, if at all, should I read or receive the **news**?
- What “knowing” should I **outsource** to, e.g., my phone, and what (if anything) should I try to appreciate for myself?
- What do I **owe to others**, as a participant in the flow of information?

WHAT WILL BE THE OUTCOME (IF ALL GOES WELL)?

Successful students will have:

- reflected on their current practices for forming/revising opinions, passing on information, and influencing others’ opinions more broadly.
- read and appreciated historical and contemporary philosophical sources advocating different approaches.
- engaged in earnest and respectful dialogue with their peers about these sensitive and personal issues.
- articulated for themselves, at the end of the course, their own reflective commitments as to the kind of epistemic agent they will be.

WHAT ARE THESE “IMMERSIVE ASSIGNMENTS”?

Sample assignments

- **Science:** For three days, journal about which of your beliefs and actions are influenced by experimental results in science; pick a few of those beliefs and find the most compelling scientific argument or study you can, arguing for an opposing belief. (If you can’t find any, check to see whether confirming studies have been successfully replicated.)
- **Relativism:** Identify three of the things you most confidently believe, and reflect on what, if any, other events or circumstances in your life might have led you to think differently. Reflect on the effects of this exercise on those same beliefs, and explain why your confidence did or did not change.
- **Skepticism:** Undertake a personal “Cartesian” meditation. 1) Identify any reasons for being skeptical (either globally or locally) you find prima facie compelling and consider implications for your current beliefs; 2) identify any reasons for being nonetheless confident or hopeful about your beliefs; and 3) state what, if anything, you think you know and might hope to know.
- **Disagreement:** Identify a belief that you confidently hold despite pervasive disagreement among those you respect intellectually, and explain why you are confident. If you do not hold any such beliefs, explain why.
-  **Filter bubbles & fake news:** Watch/read/do the exercises experimenting with filter bubbles here: <http://guides.library.illinois.edu/c.php?g=348478&p=2347794>; Scroll through your FB (or twitter) feed – or even just your Google/Apple news feed – and identify the first five news or reporting links that you see. 1) Say which you think are probably true vs. not from a credible source (fake news). 2) Do some independent digging for corroboration, using a search engine outside your filter bubble (such as duckduckgo.com), and report on the results.
- **Outsourcing and phones:** Pick a day this week, and commit to getting no information from a digital device. (Personal communication like texts and calls is fine; Googling, perusing social media sites,



and checking your phone for the weather, or a map, or the news is not.) You may need to do some research in advance of this day and write things down. (Is there a set of directions you’ll need?) You might want to make a temporary sign-off post on social media, or to install a free “digital detox” app like Off the Grid, which completely blocks your phone for a length of time. Each time you encounter a situation in which your instinct is to look something up on your phone, make a note. At the end of the day, reflect on those situations, how you handled them without being able to look something up, and whether it’s important to be less generally dependent on web-based sources of information.



- **Trusting others:** Pick a day in which you will talk with several individual people – either in person, on the phone, over e-mail (interpret “talk” broadly). Make a note of each time someone tells you something you trust vs. do not trust. Think about why. Is it the track record of the person speaking? The plausibility of what they’re telling you? Something else – maybe the person’s social role? Reflect on what this single day suggests about tendencies to trust, and on what basis.
- **Bullshit:** Write a totally “bullshit” essay (in Frankfurt’s sense) about what our epistemic obligations to other people are. Before you start, explicitly note your motive. After you’re done, reflect. How easy was that? How do you feel? What, if any, claims in your essay do you believe?
- **Epistemic justice in conversation:** Find two days this week when you can be silent and listen in the presence of others talking in public for at least one hour. Preferably, you would be in the presence of others in some way different from you. You might choose to sit at a coffee shop or restaurant; people-watch at a park, on a busy street, or at a mall; study in a loud common area on campus; or even attend a religious service. Go somewhere you don’t go often, if possible. At the end of each exercise, write down instances of what seemed like epistemically praiseworthy and blameworthy participation in conversations. Did you hear people, e.g., “citing their sources,” listening to each other charitably, or talking over others – especially others from marginalized groups?

Please reach out with suggestions/questions or to reach a copy of the draft syllabus!

laura.callahan24@gmail.com - Laura

* Syllabus originally drafted during the 2018 NEH Summer Institute on Philosophy as a Way of Life